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“Arab” Textiles in the Near East

MURRAY LEE EILAND III

Beginning in the seventh century, the expansion of Islam brought with it an outpouring of peoples from the Arabian Peninsula. While the composition of these Islamic armies became more diverse as the religion spread through the Near East and across North Africa to Western Europe, there were clearly elements of both the urban Arabian population, of which the Prophet was a member, and the rural Bedouins, whose migrations from their original homeland continued sporadically for several centuries. This slowed during the period of Turkish hegemony, but it left a scattering of enclaves identifying themselves as ethnic Arabs throughout the Islamic world.

While these groups are more difficult to distinguish from the surrounding population in regions where Arabic is the language spoken by the majority, the issue of ethnic identity is more open to question in countries with other primary languages. Indeed, in such countries most groups claiming an Arab identity are at least in part pastoral nomads, whose way of life has contributed to their remaining separate from the urban population. Among the nomads of Iran's Fars province, for example, there are groups speaking both Persian and several Turkic dialects, along with other groups speaking Arabic and still claiming an Arab identity. There is a scattering of elements claiming Arab descent also in other parts of Iran, Afghanistan, and Uzbekistan.

The degree to which such elements are truly Arab survivals has always seemed problematic. There are several ways by which a group could have changed its ethnic composition while retaining Arabic as a language. It is also conceivable that entirely unrelated ethnic groups could have adopted the language of their Arab rulers or the language of their religion, or ruling Arab aristocracies could have imposed their language upon the members of tribal groups that were not ethnically Arab. Those groups claiming Arab descent, but not speaking Arabic, could also be anything from Arabs who had changed language as the result of local politics or economic conditions, to people who had changed only their tribal designation for the same reasons. The question becomes one of determining to what extent population groups claiming an Arab label, but living in non-Arab countries, are properly classified as Arabs.

The issue is complicated by the existence, at times in the same areas, of other groups calling themselves *Sayyids* (descendants of the Prophet). While these peoples could presumably be classified as Arabs, they often speak no trace of Arabic, nor do they claim relationship with other groups known as Arabs.¹

¹ Thomas J. Barfield, *The Central Asian Arabs of Afghanistan* (Austin, 1981), pp. 5–6.

In the past there has been little effort to sort out just which of these groups purporting to be Arab have a valid claim. The approach of physical anthropology is probably more controversial today than it was half a century ago,² and linguistic analysis has proved little more useful than cranial measurements. The groups under discussion here are often alleged to have spoken a better Arabic in the past, but now speak corrupt forms with strong mixtures of Turkic or Persian dialects, obviously related to the peoples with whom these people come into contact.³

The archaeologist has been accustomed to using artifacts of material culture, particularly pottery, to illustrate relationships between peoples, but this poses particular difficulties with nomads. Accumulations of their pottery are much more difficult to find and interpret than with settled populations. Nomads have traditionally used little pottery – which is both breakable and impractically heavy for transport.

However, exploration of other aspects of the material culture of these nomadic groups may provide clues to their origins, particularly the handwoven textiles that serve so many functions in the pre-modern life-style of Near Eastern pastoral nomads. Lombard⁴ has described the Islamic civilization of the Near East as a “textile culture,” and the weaving techniques for many utilitarian items used in village and nomadic life have probably changed little over a period of many centuries. If the scattered groups claiming Arab descent were found to be weaving fabrics with a structural or design relationship to those found in recent times among villagers and nomads of the Arabian Peninsula, there could thus be evidence of a relationship in the material culture. Designs may change as local tastes and styles change, but the structure of fabrics within a given ethnic group tends to remain much more constant from generation to generation. This feature will provide the focus of observations reported in this paper.

Textiles of the rural Arabian Peninsula, virtually unknown in the West, have recently been the subject of several studies,⁵ and, after having long been inadequately reported by anthropologists, the small nomadic groups of Iran, Afghanistan, and Uzbekistan are now increasingly becoming the subject of useful studies. Currently enough material on textiles exists to allow a preliminary look at whether this element of material culture provides clues toward determining whether several nomadic groups in non-Arab countries, indeed, are truly of Arab descent.

The methodology will involve a comparison of traditional textiles of the Arabian Peninsula with products of those groups claiming Arab descent in Iran, Afghanistan, and Uzbekistan. This includes the Arab Tribe of the Khamseh Federation of the Fars Province of Iran, the Arabs of the Kashkadarya region in Turkestan, and a population claiming Arab ancestry scattered across northern Afghanistan. Beginning with a description of the textile

² Although such works as Henry Field's *Anthropology of Iran* (Chicago, 1939) devoted substantial attention to physical anthropology, much of this work was inconclusive.

³ Even Eugene Schuyler, in *Turkestan: Notes of a Journey in Russian Turkestan, Khokand, Bokhara, and Kaldja* (London, 1876), p. 110, in the mid-nineteenth century described the Arabic as “debased and corrupted.”

⁴ M. Lombard, *Les Textiles dans le Monde Muselman* (Paris, 1978), p. 294f.

⁵ John Topham, *Traditional Crafts of Saudi Arabia* (London, 1981), and Joy May Hilden, “Beduin textiles of Saudi Arabia,” *Oriental Carpet and Textile Studies, IV*, (Berkeley, 1993), pp. 221–32, have both recently published excellent materials.

types of Saudi Arabia, the study will then focus on these outlying groups with the intention of identifying related textiles.

Textiles from the Arabian Peninsula

The textiles of the Arabian Peninsula have not, during historic times, constituted significant exports to the West, and consequently they have attracted little scholarly attention. During the last decade, however, studies have begun to appear that clarify this aspect of Arabian material culture, and these have provided a basis for a comparison with textiles from Iran and Central Asia.

Most common of the Bedouin fabrics is a series woven in warp faced plain weave and warp faced complementary warp patterning. These are usually woven on horizontal looms ranging from less than one foot to no more than three feet wide so that a large fabric must be assembled from a number of strips. These strips may be quite long, often exceeding fifty feet. As would be assumed from the technique, the designs consist mostly of stripes parallel to the long axis of the fabric, and these are used as rugs, tent curtains, and blankets. Other utilitarian objects are also made up of these narrow strips, including various types of animal and tent bags.

Rugs and blankets are also made of weft-faced plain weave and dovetailed and slit-tapestry kilim, usually in simple designs. The weft-faced interlocking technique is less common, and one occasionally encounters a weft-faced twined tapestry technique. This may occur for the design elements on a warp-faced fabric. Bedouin textiles often show two or more techniques on the same textile (Figure 1).

Pile fabrics are not so common among the Saudi Bedouin, and at the present they are apparently made only in northern Saudi Arabia around Sakaka.⁶ Many recently woven Saudi rugs appear to be imitations of other common types, usually from Iran. This has raised some questions as to whether the pile carpet is indigenous to Saudi Arabia, although its ancient lineage is suggested by the existence of an Arabic word, *tinfasa*, which almost certainly refers to a shaggy, pile fabric.⁷ There is also an indigenous type of pile carpet woven by Arabs in Iraq.⁸

All of the Saudi Arabian carpets are woven with the standard symmetrical knot so common throughout the Near East. Those that apparently imitate such Iranian types as the Qashqa'i weaves have the knots tied over two warps, as is traditional throughout the area. There is, nevertheless, a type which employs simple, geometric designs – almost certainly an indigenous type of rug – that shows a structure found rarely in other rug weaving areas. The knots are tied only on the two warps that happen to be on the surface in that shed, which means that the pattern is obscured on the back of the carpet. A single knot thus covers the width of four warps, but it is actually tied over only two, while the next row of

⁶ Topham, *op. cit.*, p. 61.

⁷ William H. Worrell, "On certain Arabic terms for Rug," *Ars Islamica*, I, (1935), pp. 209–22. The author discusses use of the words, *bisat*, *tinfasa*, *zarbiya*, and *mahfura*, concluding that *tinfasa* is a loan word from Aramaic and is an "ancient international commercial word" referring to nap or pile.

⁸ E. L. Ochsenschlager, "Village weavers: ethnoarchaeology at al-Hiba," *Bulletin of Sumerian Agriculture*, III (1987), pp. 43–62.

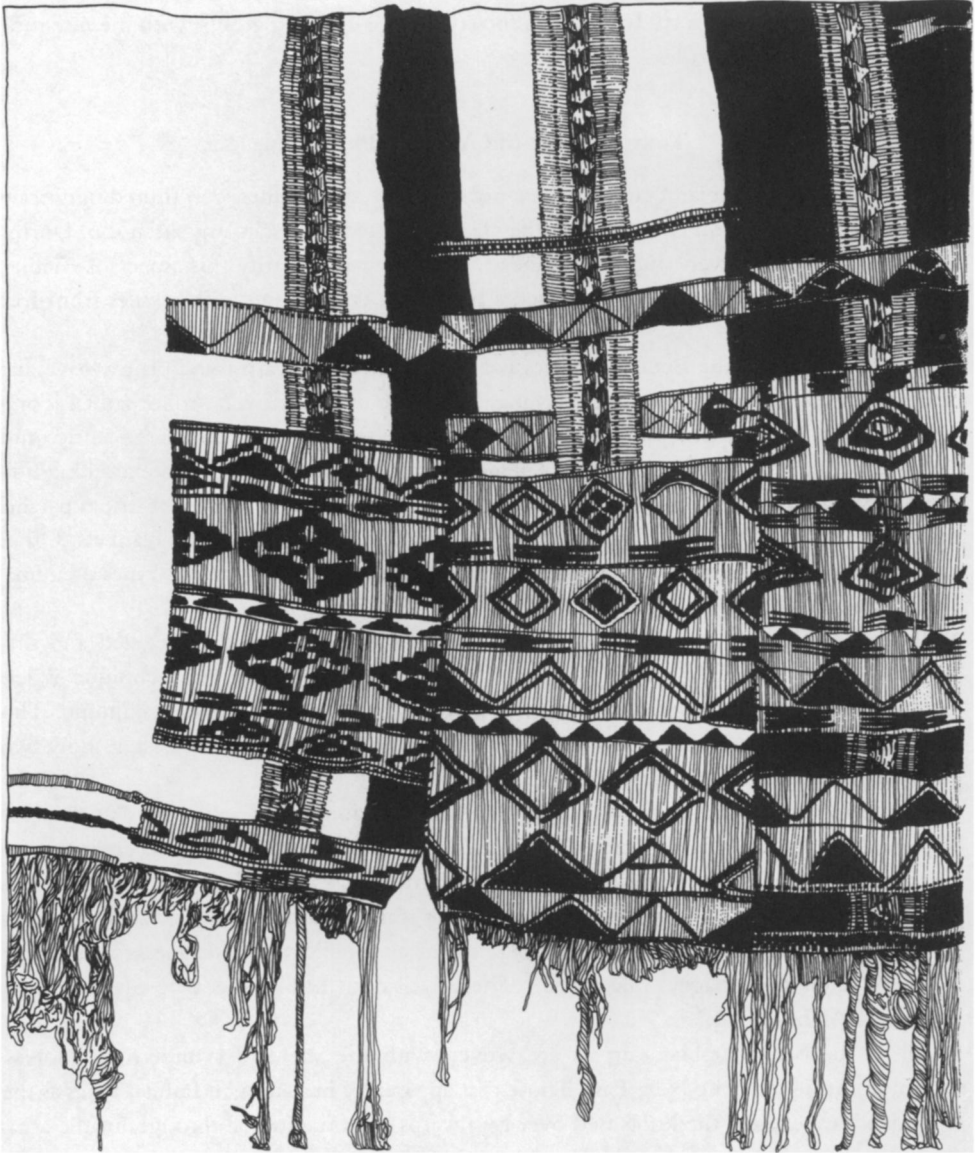


Fig. 1. Tent curtain from Saudi Arabia (after Topham, p. 30) showing multiple techniques with design both in weft-faced and warp-faced structures.

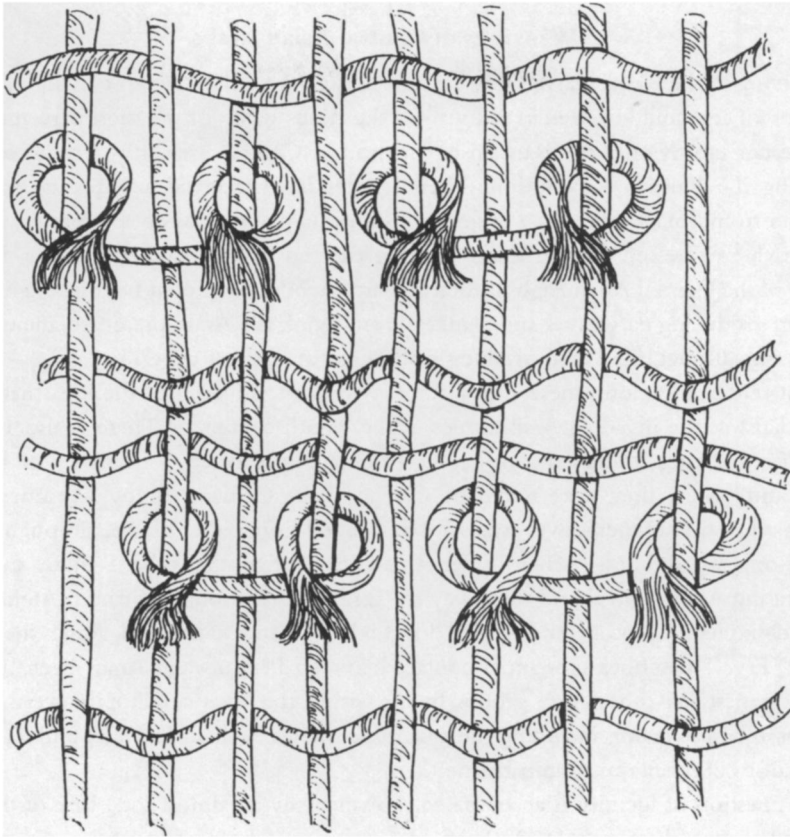


Fig. 2. Pile carpet structure with: symmetrical knots tied on every other warp, using only the shed closest to the weaver. This method of knotting, in which the design does not show at the back of the rug, is used both in some Saudi Arabian Bedouin rugs and Arab rugs from Uzbekistan and Afghanistan.

knots is tied over the alternate two (Figure 2).⁹ Despite the relative coarseness of the fabric, it is stable.¹⁰ Ordinarily these rugs are either narrow enough to have been woven in one piece on the loom or are combined from two or three strips. The designs found on the few surviving pieces of this type which may date back to the nineteenth century are simple and geometric, suggestive of the designs in Figure 1.

While these fabrics may not be the exact counterparts of what was woven at the time of the Bedouin migrations from the Arabian Peninsula, it is virtually certain that fabrics of that time, woven from locally grown animal fibres, performed the same functions then as now. One would expect that the techniques, which are thought to remain constant over a period of many centuries, would survive better than design elements, which often vary according to local fashion.

⁹ Conversations conducted by Murray L. Eiland, Jr. with Joy May Hilden and John Topham, generated no proof that the technique of tying the knot over four warps is the earliest, indigenous style. This assumption is based on the observation that the designs that seem most likely to be indigenous appear in this technique.

¹⁰ These coarsely woven pile rugs are further stabilized by the use of weft twining, which is, so far as I am aware, used nowhere else in the Near East.

Weavings of Central Asian Arabs

Arabs living in the Kashkadarya Oblast of Uzbekistan are related to those living in northern Afghanistan and could be seen as residuals of the Arabs who, for the most part, migrated to Afghanistan shortly after the Russian occupation of Central Asia or as a result of turmoil following the Russian Revolution. Their textiles have received a surprising amount of attention from Soviet scholars, whose conclusions may not always bear close examination. Moshkova¹¹ expressed a belief that, "Among the most stable elements of the distinctive culture of the Central Asian Arabs is their rug art," while she quoted Logofet¹² as indicating that, "in producing flatweaves and blankets from wool, the Arabs preserved ancient Arabic designs that distinguished their products from those of all other tribes."

Local traditions among these Arabs differ, with some holding to the idea that they are descendants of the invading Arab armies of the eighth century.¹³ There is also a tradition that, after sacking Damascus in 1401, Tamerlane deported a number of Arabs to Samarqand, where they were noted by Clavijo,¹⁴ the Castilian envoy. Presumably those peoples who still call themselves Arabs are descended from either group, although these are not the only possibilities. Akiner¹⁵ offers an additional hypothesis that, "there was a group of migrating Arabs who found their way to Central Asia through northern Afghanistan in the mid-sixteenth century and settled in Bukhara, Samarkand, and along the Kashkadarya." Frye¹⁶ describes substantial contact between Persians and Arabs even before the Arab conquest. At times Arab groups living within the Sasanian Empire were exiled to other parts of the realm, including the east. Frye quotes both al-Tha'alibi and Tabari as to deportations of rebellious Arab tribesmen.

The question of identity is accentuated, however, by an almost total lack of the Arabic language among these people. As Barfield¹⁷ points out from 1959 Soviet census figures, there were only 2,79 Arabic speakers listed from an Arabic population of 29,000 in Central Asia. Today Arabic is spoken in only a few villages, and "all the Arabic speakers are at least bilingual, and many are trilingual."

Schuyler¹⁸ mentioned in the mid-nineteenth century that these Arabs weave, "woollen and cotton stuffs and make excellent carpets." Russian travellers by the late nineteenth century noted Arab rugs and textiles, and Semenov¹⁹ in particular recorded the high quality of the Arab flatweaves from Dinau and Karshi. There is information also on pile weaves made by one Arab tribe near Dinau. "They are reminiscent in their designs and properties of the Karakalpak rugs of the Andizhan and Kokand Uyezds, and they are frequently made from narrow strips sewn together."²⁰ While these rugs are not

¹¹ V. G. Moshkova, *Carpets of the Peoples of Central Asia* (Tashkent, 1979), p. 509. An English translation of this important work, by David Bradley and Louise Virgin, was published in *Oriental Rug Review* in instalments throughout Volumes III and IV. The Arabs of the Kashkadarya Oblast were discussed in Vol. III, No. 12, and the page numbers refer to this rather than the original publication.

¹² D. N. Logofet, *Bukharskoe Khantsvot pod Russkaim Protectoratum*, i (1911), pp. 174ff.

¹³ V. V. Barthold, *Turkestan Down to the Mongol Invasion* (London, 1928), pp. 94-6, 182-6.

¹⁴ R. G. Clavijo, *Clavijo's Embassy to Tamerlane*, tr. G. Le Strange (London, 1928), pp. 287-8.

¹⁵ Shirin Akiner, *Islamic Peoples of the Soviet Union* (London, 1983), pp. 366-7.

¹⁶ Richard Frye, *The Golden Age of Persia: The Arabs in the East* (London, 1975), p. 25.

¹⁷ Barfield, *op. cit.*, p. 4.

¹⁸ Schuyler, *op. cit.*, p. 110.

¹⁹ A. A. Semenov, "Kovry Russkogo Turkestana," *Ethnograficheskoe Obozrenie*, 1911, Nos 88-9, p. 9.

²⁰ This is quoted from the translation of Moshkova, (*op. cit.*, p. 510) where it is quoted from "The rug production of the Transcaspian Oblast and neighboring countries," *Zakaspiiskoe obozrenie*, no. 5 (1905).

depicted in any Soviet publication, there is at least an indirect way to ascertain their appearance.

In the process of purchasing rugs in Afghanistan in the 1970s, George O'Bannon²¹ found an unusual group of coarse, long-pile rugs woven in longitudinal strips sewn together. Although he had several theories as to which ethnic group had woven these pieces, he found Barfield's description of carpet weaving among the Arabs promising and sent the latter some photos of these rugs. The reply indicated that they were of the type woven by Arabs in northern Afghanistan (Figure 3), which are presumably the same as those woven by Arab nomads in Uzbekistan.²²

There are several important points to be made about these rugs. First, they are too coarse and irregular in shape ever to have been woven for the commercial market, which makes it more likely that they were an indigenous type, woven by the Arab tribespeople for local use. Second, they strongly resemble the pile carpet weaving to be found among the Bedouins of Saudi Arabia. They are symmetrically knotted over four warps, as are the Bedouin rugs, with the knot tied only on the top shed of warps. Consequently the design does not show clearly on the back of the rug (Photograph 1). As if the resemblance to Bedouin products were not already close enough, the wider rugs are also made by sewing together two or three narrow strips. The wefts, however, are not twined, as they are in Bedouin rugs, but Topham suggests²³ that this feature is a recent innovation.

One can appreciate the importance of these technical features more after a survey of all the pile weaves to be found in the intervening several thousand miles between Saudi Arabia and the Arab settlements in Uzbekistan and Afghanistan. The symmetrical knot tied over only the top shed of warps appears on the rugs of no other intervening peoples known to this writer. The designs of Bedouin rugs from Arabia and those of the Arabs of Uzbekistan appear to show similarities in their geometric simplicity. (This technique appears on a small group of Turkmen tent banks, but not on Turkmen pile carpets.)

While rugs of this type, labelled as *julkhyrs* in the rug trade, are often described as Uzbeki products (those not made in Afghanistan are, after all, products of Uzbekistan), the author has, on a recent trip to Uzbekistan, confirmed by first-hand experience that they are woven by people in the Kashkadarya Oblast who still describe themselves as Arabs. Among examples found in place are rugs that must date to the turn of the century and others that were only recently cut from the loom. Even the rug dealers as far away as Bukhara recognize that these rugs are made by Arabs of the Kashkadarya Oblast.

Yet there are references to these *julkhyrs* in earlier Soviet literature that leave their ethnic origin ambiguous. Moshkova²⁴ concluded that it is impossible to know exactly who made them, as even the scholars who visited their places of manufacture, such as Semonov,²⁵ Gavrilov,²⁶ and Grebenkin²⁷ were not specific as to exactly which ethnic groups were involved. Since the weaving of these rugs took place in Uzbekistan, they were assumed by some to be Uzbeki work, but even Moshkova points out that the word *julkhyrs* is a

²¹ George O'Bannon, "What we can learn from anthropologists," *Oriental Rug Review* (Sept. 1983), pp. 24-6.

²² Topham, *op. cit.*, p. 60. ²³ Moshkova, *op. cit.*, p. 510. ²⁴ Semonov, *op. cit.*, p. 13.

²⁵ M. F. Gavrilov, "The weaving art of the Uzbeki women of Milyabad village," *Trudy SAGU* (Tashkent, 1929), pp. 14-15.

²⁶ A. D. Grebenkin, "Uzbeki," *Russkii Turkestan* (Moscow, 1972), p. 57.

²⁷ Moshkova, *op. cit.*, p. 327.

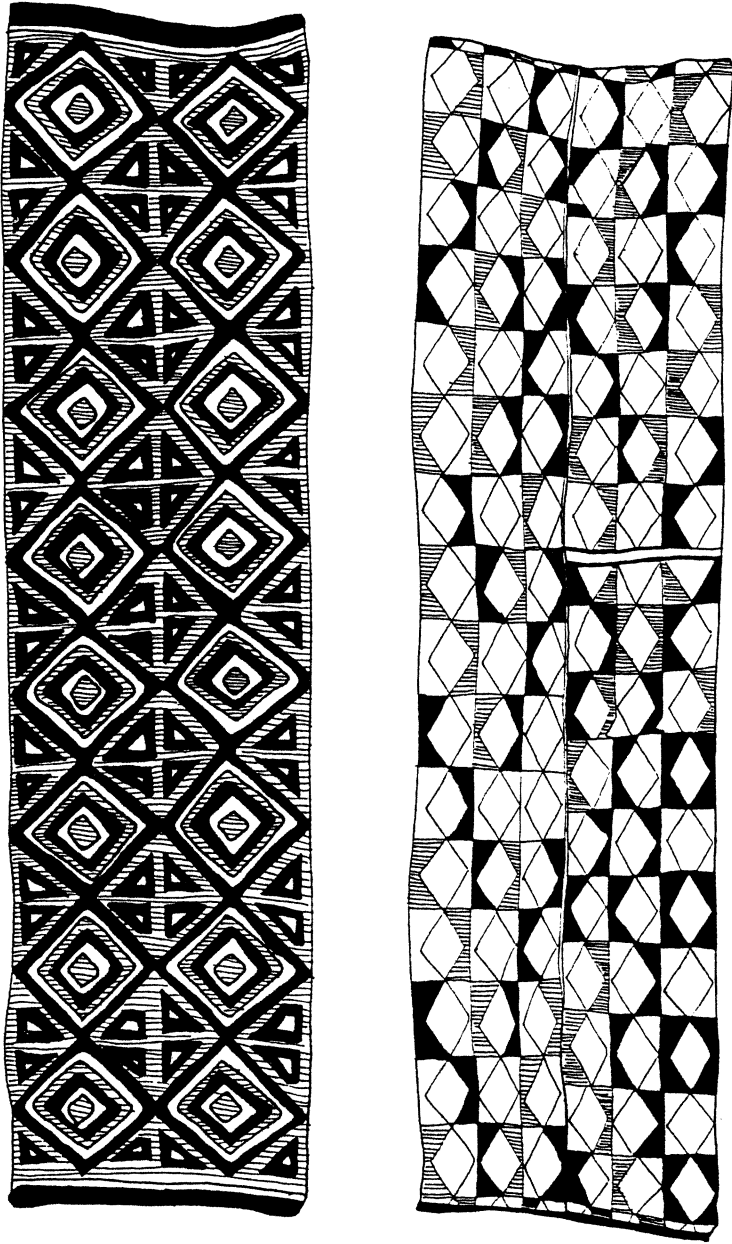


Fig. 3. Drawings of Arab rugs purchased in northern Afghanistan. Note the design similarities to the Saudi Arabian tent curtain in Figure 1. From a private California collection.



Photograph 1. *Julkhyrs* photographed in Uzbekistan from a village in the Kashkadarya Oblast. Note that the design does not show on the back and that it is woven in four longitudinal strips.

"compound of Arabic and Iranian origin."²⁸ Clearly from the personal observations of this author, Kashkadarya Arabs weave *julkhys*. It is uncertain whether Uzbeki groups also weave them.

In addition to pile weaves, the Arabs of Central Asia are most noted for various flatweaves, and the group living around the town of Karshi has been studied by Soviet scholars. According to Moshkova,²⁹ these Arabs consider themselves members of several kinship groups: the Mushkoki, Khojaki, and Shaibani. Interestingly, there is a major kinship group by this latter name among the Arabs of the Khamseh Confederacy in Iran, although this by no means constitutes proof of a relationship.³⁰

Moshkova continues with reports of tribal traditions that these people had been rugweavers well before migrating to Central Asia, concluding with the observation that, "the typological distinctiveness of this art allows us to view this claim as likely." The early Central Asian traveller Dudin,³¹ however, had reached an opposing conclusion that, "the decoration of Arabic flatweaves is a more or less simplified version of the decoration of Turkmen rugs."

This latter opinion may be excessively pessimistic, as the kilim design most commonly associated with the Kashkadarya Arabs (Figure 4) bears more than a passing resemblance to one found among the Arab Khamseh weavers of Iran (Figure 5). This design is so clearly associated with Arab weaving in northern Afghanistan that when examples appear in the rug shops of Kabul, they are routinely labelled as Arab work.³²

In addition to the large flatwoven rugs made mostly for the market, the Kashkadarya Arabs have woven a variety of bags for storage of objects within the tent and for transport. These included the traditional Near Eastern *khordjin* (saddlebag) and *torba* (small, rectangular cloth bags with the opening along one long side). As these items are ordinarily not made for commerce, they are likely to have changed little over a period of many years, perhaps centuries. While it is clear that most examples published by Moshkova resemble work of the neighbouring Turkmen, as Dudin suggested, there are several designs that show similarities to materials still woven among Saudi Bedouin (Figures 6 and 7). Not only is the simple design strikingly similar from one place to the next, but it is woven in the same technique – slit tapestry kilim – in both locations.

It is not clear whether the Arabs of Uzbekistan have produced the long warp-faced strips which are used by the Bedouin to produce small rugs and various types of bags. Long bands of warp faced complementary warp patterned weave have been a common commodity in the rug shops of Afghanistan, but specific tribal identification has been problematic, and Moshkova makes no mention of such fabrics.

One should recall that climatic differences between Saudi Arabia and Uzbekistan have made for one major shift in the material culture of the Central Asian Arabs. Black tents are not suitable for such harsh winters, and the felt yurts used by these people do not

²⁸ Moshkova, *op. cit.*, p. 510.

²⁹ Field, *op. cit.*, p. 213.

³⁰ S. M. Dudin, "Carpet products of Central Asia", *Anthropology of the USSR Academy of Sciences Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography*, vol. 7 (Leningrad, 1928), p. 138.

³¹ Personal communication from Murray L. Eiland, Jr., who dealt with a variety of Kabul dealers from 1971 through 1979.

³² Barfield, *op. cit.*, p. 6.



Fig. 4. Arab kilim from the Kashkadarya Oblast of Uzbekistan (after Moshkova, Fig. 44).

customarily have the same kinds of tent curtains that form such an important part of Bedouin weaving.

While there are a number of designs associated with the Kashkadarya Arabs that apparently have no relatives among the Saudi Bedouins or the Arab Khamseh tribe, those similar aspects of material culture that do occur are at least strongly suggestive of a relationship.

Weavings of the Arabs of Afghanistan

The Arab population of Afghanistan has, until recently, been poorly studied, although a number of textiles have long been identified as Arab products in the bazaars of Kabul and Mazar-i-Sharif (refer to Figure 2). Thomas Barfield's excellent account describes local Arab traditions that these people entered Afghanistan from the Khanate of Bokhara, beginning

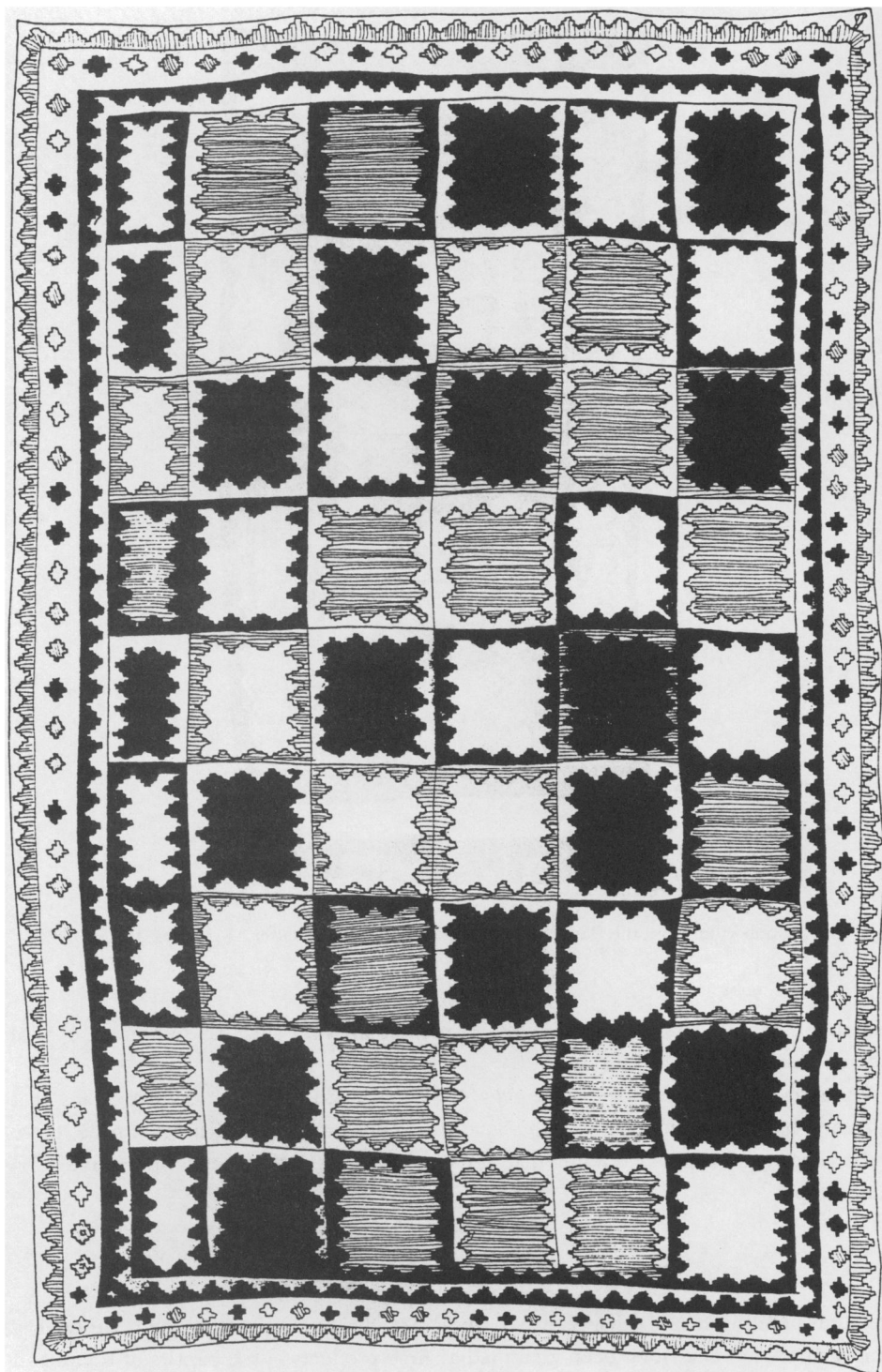


Fig. 5. Kilim woven by the Arab Khamseh tribe of the Fars province in Iran. Note the similarity to Figure 4.

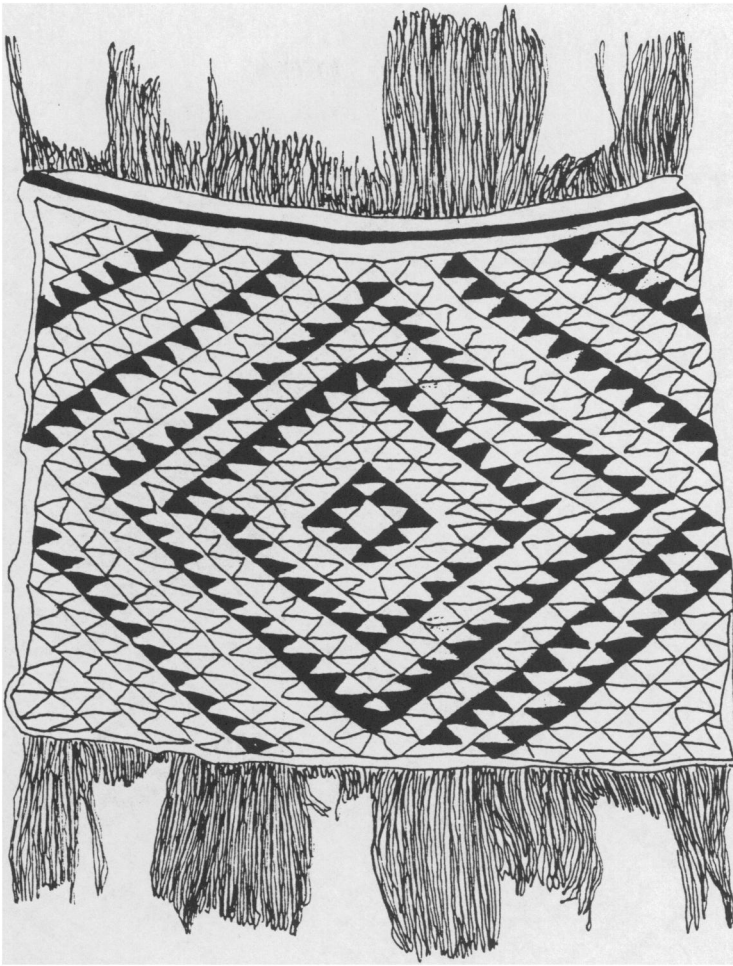


Fig. 6. Arab *khordjin* from the Kashkadarya Oblast of Uzbekistan (after Moshkova, Fig. 51).

after the military campaign of 1865 to 1868, in which the Russians took control of the region. Rather than submit to indirect Christian rule, the Arabs, as well as large numbers of Turkmen, moved south into Afghanistan, where they established scattered settlements within the arc between Maimana and Kunduz.³³

This migration appears to have accelerated at times of stress during the twentieth century. The Russian Revolution was certainly a factor, while the Soviet collectivization of the 1930s hastened the departure of more nomads. As no modern census of Afghanistan has ever been done, it is impossible to estimate the number of Arabs there, but Barfield³⁴ suggests a figure of 100,000, and he provides a coherent account of their lifestyle. He indicates that, “None of the Arabs I met in northeastern Afghanistan spoke Arabic, nor did they know any Arabs who did.” “They declared that Farsi . . . had been their native tongue for as long as anyone could remember.”³⁵

³³ Barfield, *op. cit.*, p. 6.

³⁴ Barfield, *op. cit.*, p. 4.

³⁵ Barfield, *op. cit.*, p. 54–5.

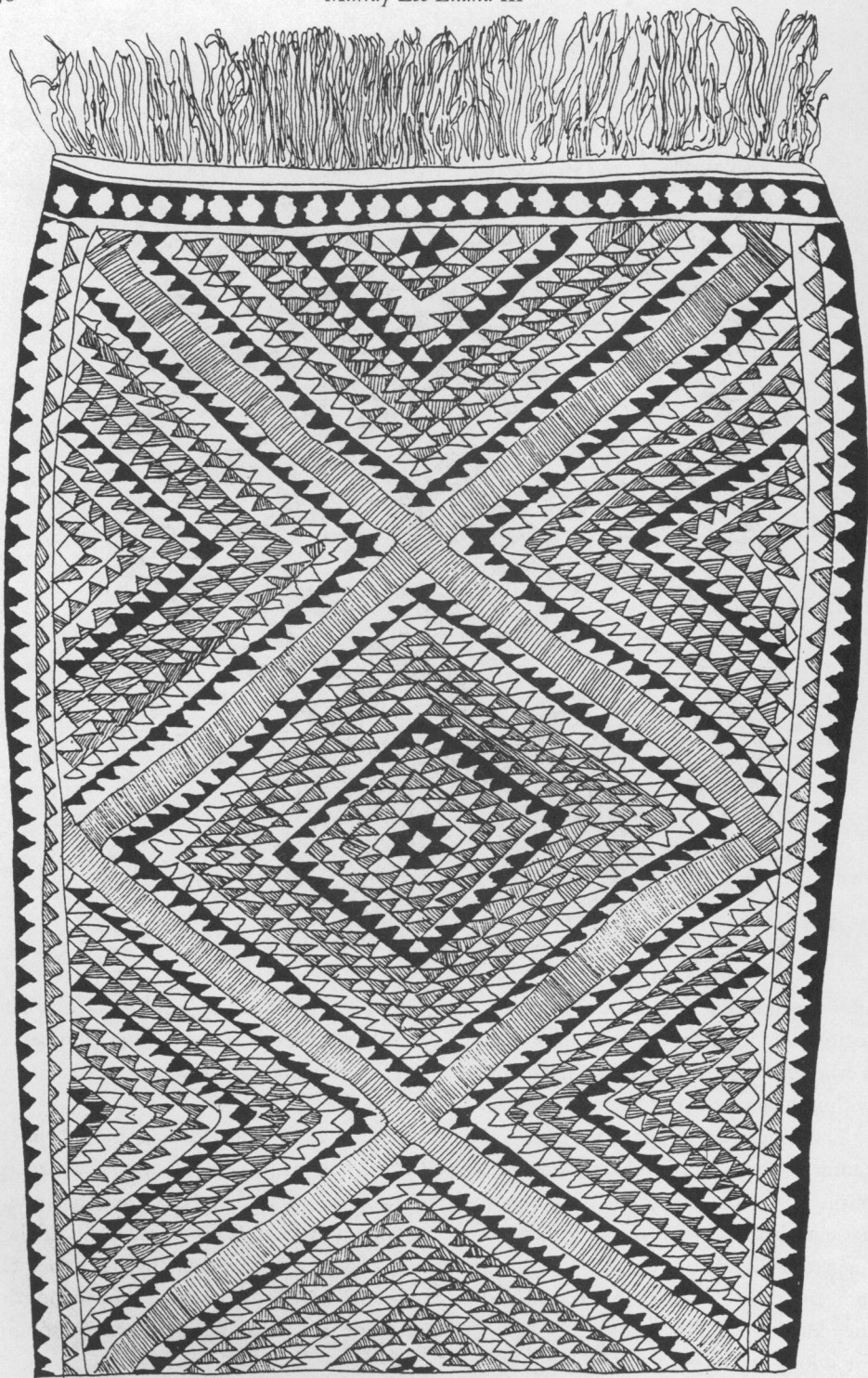


Fig. 7. Bedouin kilim from Saudi Arabia (after Topham). Note the design similarity to the *khordjin* from the Kashkadarya Arabs.

Unfortunately, Barfield gave few details about the material culture of these people, beyond his information, mentioned above, that they wove a type of pile carpet.³⁶ Since the region is now virtually inaccessible because of the civil war in Afghanistan, there is no way at present to survey the Arab weavings of northern Afghanistan for similarities to Bedouin work. In the late 1960s and 1970s, however, vast quantities of woven materials were exported from Afghanistan to the West, and interviews with several of the merchants involved suggest that Arab designs published by Soviet authors were not uncommon.³⁷ Probably these represent a continuing of tradition by Arabs that had crossed the Afghan border.

The Arabs of Southern Iran

Nomads of the Fars province of Iran have belonged to two major groups: the Qashqa'i, the majority of whom speak a Turkic language, and the substantially more ethnically diverse Khamseh Confederacy. This latter group includes tribes labelled as Ainalu, Baharlu, Baseri, Nafar, and Arab, with the latter constituting somewhere between one half and two thirds of the Confederacy. Their numbers are estimated anywhere between approximately 11,000 people by Field in 1918³⁸ and the 6,000 families Edwards³⁹ describes in 1948.

These nomads are alleged by their traditions and by a number of commentators – without any clear substantiation – to have entered Iran in the seventh century at the time of the Arab conquest. According to their own account,⁴⁰ they came from Nejd, Oman, and Yemen. They still speak a corrupt Arabic, and, although they underwent great privations during the forced settlements decreed by Reza Shah, many of them resumed their migrations after 1941.⁴¹ They farm little, but formerly specialized in providing camel transport for other migrating tribes. Their migrations and settlements are generally located to the east of Shiraz and mostly to the south.

The Arabs of Fars have received little attention from the West, perhaps because they are, for the most part, extremely poor, and their woven products have recently been of a lower grade than Qashqa'i work. Edwards⁴² published fifteen photos of Arab rugs, and Gluck⁴³ published in colour two soumak woven pieces attributed to the Sheibani division of the Arab tribe. What one notices immediately about these pieces is that there is nothing distinctive about the designs, and, indeed, there are frequent borrowings from classic Persian patterns. The rugs are usually asymmetrically knotted, and they are almost always all wool, often with dark wool wefts.

On a 1992 visit to the Shiraz bazaar, where Arab rugs have traditionally been marketed, there were a number of rugs still identified by the dealers as Arab. Those who have known these rugs for decades believe that they show no designs not found on other Khamseh rugs, although they tend to average a little darker in colour and are often woven with low grades of wool. These pile rugs have virtually nothing in common either in technique or design

³⁶ Personal communication from James Opie, a Portland, U.S.A., dealer in tribal rugs.

³⁷ Field, *op. cit.*, p. 213. ³⁸ A. C. Edwards, *The Persian Carpet* (London, 1953), p. 288.

³⁹ Field, *op. cit.*, p. 213. ⁴⁰ Edwards, *op. cit.*, p. 285.

⁴¹ Edwards, *op. cit.*, pp. 295–300.

⁴² Jay Gluck and Sumi Hiramoto Gluck, *A Survey of Persian Handicraft* (Tehran, 1977), pp. 309, 311.

⁴³ A search through the bazaar for Arab woven products is not a substitute for more intensive field work among this group – which apparently no one has undertaken to this time – but that course was not available to us in 1992.

with rugs woven in Saudi Arabia, and this should not be surprising. The identifiable Arab rugs of Fars are commercial products of probably little more than the last century.

Any resemblances that do remain are more likely to be found among the flatweaves, bags, and animal trappings woven for use within the tribe rather than for sale.⁴⁴ There was, however, the above-mentioned kilim design identified as Arab work (refer to Figure 5). Although examples are quite variable, and often show stripes of other design elements between the large square boxes, it bears more than a passing resemblance to the most common type of flatweave woven from the Kashkadarya region of Uzbekistan (see Figure 4). Both types are woven in the slit-tapestry kilim technique.

Another of the Khamseh tribes of Iran, the Baseri, also make some claims of Arab descent, specifically that they were originally from the Basra area. Those few woven products identified as Baseri in the Shiraz bazaar show no similarities to work of the Saudi Bedouin.⁴⁵

The same observations apply to rugs woven by small groups of Arabic-speaking nomads in the vicinity of Firdaus (Tun) and Tabas, east of Iran's great central desert. Edwards⁴⁶ is the only Westerner to give an on-the-spot account of their rugs at a time (1948) when they still strongly resembled Baluchi rugs, with obvious borrowings from classic Persian designs. Weavers from this region were to be seen by the author at the crafts fair portion of the First Grand Persian Carpet Exhibition and Conference in 1992, but by this time they were weaving either gabbeh types – a coarse weave in simple patterns – in shades of grey and brown, or medium grade adaptations of Persian city rugs. From a distance it would appear as though these people also show no trace of an Arab cultural heritage in their current woven products.

Conclusion

While questions may remain around the exact ethnic origins of various groups claiming an Arab identity in Iran and parts of Central Asia, a survey of one aspect of their material culture – textiles – at least suggests the possibility of cultural survivals other than language. The use of a highly unusual pile carpet technique among the Saudi Bedouins and the Arabs of Uzbekistan – and, to this writer's knowledge, nowhere else in between – strongly suggests a direct relationship.

The use of the same kilim technique for essentially the same design among Arabs in both Saudi Arabia and Uzbekistan (Figures 6 and 7) suggests that this design, indeed, may have been in use before the two groups became separate. While the design may be seen as technique driven,⁴⁷ the similarities are so substantial that it is difficult to imagine that the two textiles are not related.

The similarities between at least one kilim design (Figure 4) from the Arabs of

⁴⁴ Jenny Housego, *Tribal Rugs* (New York, 1978), has published a rug as Plate 26 identified as Basiri.

⁴⁵ Edwards, *op. cit.*, pp. 187–8, 196.

⁴⁶ Marla Mallett, "Tracking the archetype: technique-generated and their mutant offspring," *Oriental Rug Review* (Dec./Jan., 1993/4), pp. 10–25. Mallett discusses the relationship between design and technique, suggesting that certain designs naturally follow from the limitations of the technique.

⁴⁷ Richard Tapper, *Some Minorities in the Middle East* (London, 1992), p. 1–5, provides an excellent introduction to the status of minorities in the Near East.

Uzbekistan and the Arab Khamseh tribe of Iran (Figure 5) are also suggestive of a relationship.

It is also clear that there is no demonstrable relationship between such commercial textiles as the pile rugs made by the Arab nomads of Fars and the small commercial production of Saudi Arabia. The Fars products have been so oriented to distant markets within at least the last century that one should expect to find no relationship to any traditional fabric.

While the material presented here remains suggestive as a means of relating the scattered Arab groups in Iran, Afghanistan, and Central Asia to the population of the Arabian Peninsula, it puts forward a methodology based around some part of the material culture other than the study of ceramics, which is not such a cultural determinant among nomads.

This paper in no sense represents an end point in the work that should be done to clarify the open questions. Access to the Arabs of northern Afghanistan is still problematic because of the turmoil in that country. At the time of this writing, political considerations may make the Arab minority in the Fars province of Iran even less accessible. Following the Iran-Iraq War, the Iranian government has taken steps to integrate more completely the Khamseh Arabs into Iranian society, a move that requires de-emphasis of the Arabic language.

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